

PARTISANSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

By William Nicoson

Partisanship in political campaigning is inevitable. Partisanship in governing is deplorable. The primary mission of a candidate for office is to be elected on a party platform supported by a party organization. Once elected, the primary mission of a public official is to serve his constituents – all of them regardless of party – to the best of his or her ability and judgment. After election, in other words, the primary mission of the public official is to serve the public before the party.

The Virginia legislative races last year were fiercely contested on a partisan basis, because control of both houses of the General Assembly was at stake. The Republicans won a narrow margin in both houses for the first time since Reconstruction. There was fear that the Grand Old Party would enforce party discipline on all matters of consequence, and remake the legislative fabric of the state. In the current legislative session, the good news is that legislators appear to be influenced far more by local constituencies and personal conscience than by party politics.

Consider Reston's Delegate Ken Plum, who chairs the state Democratic Party. He also chairs the Dulles Corridor Rail Association and, in that capacity, presented a laudatory plaque to Republican Governor James S. Gilmore III for making rail in the Dulles Corridor a state priority. It's true that the Governor's acceptance speech warned the opposition against "cherry-picking" the transportation plan he submitted to the General Assembly, but it turned out that Republican legislators did as much cherry-picking as colleagues across the aisle.

Republican Delegate Jack Rollison of Prince William County, who chairs the House Transportation Committee, led an insurgent group of Republicans and Democrats who insisted on spelling out what projects would get what portion of some \$2.5 billion in transportation funds over 6 years. After review by the Appropriations Committee and numerous amendments, his bill passed the House by a vote of 84-14. Dulles Corridor rail was listed to receive \$110 million. Negotiations with the Senate are pending.

Consider Reston's Democratic Senator Janet Howell, whose bill, as I reported last week, authorizes a referendum on a 5% gas tax increase in Northern Virginia to pay for transportation improvements. Half of the 32 Senators voting for her bill were Republicans.

Consider Delegate L. Karen Darner, Arlington Democrat, who for nine years has sought to legalize sodomy between consenting adults (including married couples) against an unrelenting block of conservatives. This year she sponsored a bill which simply reduced the crime from a felony to a misdemeanor. By a vote of 50-49, she achieved this modest reform – because 17 Republicans saw things her way.

As these examples indicate, Republican majorities in the General Assembly have not altered the shifting alliances which form among legislators based on principle and constituencies rather than

party. Republicans have voted with labor leaders to help laid-off workers and joined with environmentalists to protect wetlands. Democrats have supported party identification at the polling booth and moments of silence in schools. Our legislators are doing what they think is right for us, not what they're told is right for the party.

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